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# 3 Upstate residents had major roles in assassination probe

By PAT BUTLER  
Staff Writer

**F**letcher Thompson didn't have time to mourn the president.

As a stricken nation watched John F. Kennedy being laid to rest 25 years ago, Thompson sat at a desk in the Dallas FBI office, working frenetically to finish a report on the investigation into the president's assassination.

"I can remember a very eerie, weird feeling," Thompson said. "They had a radio on close to where I was working, and I remember hearing the commentators describing the funeral procession on Pennsylvania Avenue. I can remember thinking, 'This is unreal. I'm down here sorting through reports during the funeral of the president of the United States.'"

Thompson, now a Spartanburg lawyer, was assigned by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to direct the agency's investigation into the assassination. While the rest of the nation tried to recover from the

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*Brent Hughes,  
retired FBI specialist*

shock of losing one of its most popular leaders in history, Thompson and fellow FBI agents were working around the clock to find out how it could have happened.

As Thompson was putting together a report for Hoover, Brent Hughes, a retired FBI information specialist now living in Boiling Springs, was also in Dallas, examining the scene of the crime so that he could reconstruct it for the Warren Commission.

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Commission. And Paul Stombaugh, now running the Greenville County Crime Lab, was examining the FBI's evidence, including the rifle Lee Harvey Oswald used to shoot the president.

On Tuesday, 25 years will have gone by since the three former FBI agents began working on what they all remember as one of the most fascinating cases in their careers. Though they say some questions have never been answered, they believe the FBI investigation still stands up to the barrage of criticism and conspiracy theories that have been thrown at it over the past 2½ decades.

On Nov. 22, 1963, Thompson was a supervisor in the criminal division at FBI headquarters in Washington. He was in charge of investigating certain crimes, including the assault or murder of a federal officer.

Hoover desperately wanted his agency to handle the investigation of the Kennedy slaying, and he asked Thompson to see whether the FBI's power to investigate the assault of a federal officer applied to the president. Thompson checked but found that killing the president was not then a federal crime, though it has been made one since.

But Hoover was foiled only temporarily. On Sunday, the day Dallas bar owner Jack Ruby killed Oswald and two days after Kennedy was killed, Lyndon B. Johnson, in one of his first acts as president, told Hoover to start an FBI investigation and to have a report ready on Tuesday.

"Mr. Hoover never did admit there was anything the FBI couldn't do, so he said, 'We'll have it,'" Thompson said. He and another agent were put in charge of the investigation and were flown to Dallas, where a Texas agent picked them up and took them to their hotel.

The next time they saw the hotel was when they went to pick up their unused luggage after the investigation was over.

Each agent in Dallas was concentrating on a specific category, including checking into Ruby's background; searching the Texas School Book Depository, where the assassin's gun was recovered; and talking to witnesses from Dealey Plaza, where the president's motor-

cade came to a grisly halt.

"My job was to sort through all the voluminous material and set up some type of a chronology as to what we thought had happened," Thompson said. He flew the 25-page report back to Washington, where it became a key resource for the Warren Commission, which Johnson convened on Nov. 29 to make a comprehensive report to the American people.

"I will say with some pride that based on what I've seen and heard and read in the 25 years since then, our little report that we put together in the hours after the assassination is pretty accurate," said Thompson, whose FBI number and badge were retired when he left the agency as an assistant director in 1975.

There were questions in Thompson's mind when he submitted the report 25 years ago, and he said there haven't been any answers since then.

"I think there's no question that Lee Harvey Oswald killed the president. But the question is whether others were involved," Thompson said. "I don't know the answers to those questions."

Conspiracy theories about Kennedy's death abound, with everyone from Cuban assassins to Mafia hit men and even Johnson himself accused of either pulling the trigger or directing Oswald to do so. Some say Oswald was the only gunman — a lunatic who killed the president to satisfy his twisted sense of glory. Others bring out reams of evidence they say proves conclusively that Oswald could not have pulled off the crime of the century by himself.

Thompson said he believes Oswald was the only gunman, but he says it is possible that Oswald was hired by someone else.

"I still have an open mind as to what motivated (Oswald) and whether there was someone else behind it," he said. Oswald's ties to the Soviet Union and Cuba can't be ignored, he said, but like many others, he believes those questions will never be answered with Oswald and Ruby gone.

Brent Hughes was also in Washington at the time of the assassination, working in the FBI's exhibits section, responsible for making charts, maps, diagrams and models for use in prosecuting cases. He and

two others from the department went to Dallas in early December to study Dealey Plaza and provide investigators in Washington with a model of the scene. "Our main purpose was to keep the Warren Commission from having to go to Dallas," Hughes said. "We brought the crime scene to them."

They built a precision scale model of the plaza, showing, among other things, the motorcade's route, the Texas School Book Depository and the "grassy knoll," a sheltered area ahead of the motorcade that has been skeptics' favorite location for a second gunman.

While he was in Dallas, Hughes had a chance to examine the site thoroughly. Although his role was not to uncover evidence or theorize about assassins, he developed strong opinions about the investigation and the findings of the Warren Commission.

"People who are interested and look into (the assassination) . . . no longer put any stock in the Warren Commission report," he said. Hughes's main objection to the commission's findings is its much-maligned "single-bullet theory."

That theory, that Kennedy's back and throat wounds and all of Texas Gov. John Connally's wounds were caused by one bullet, is based on a grainy, out-of-focus movie taken by bystander Abraham Zapruder. The commission analyzed the movie, frame by frame, trying to determine the points when the president and Connally were shot.

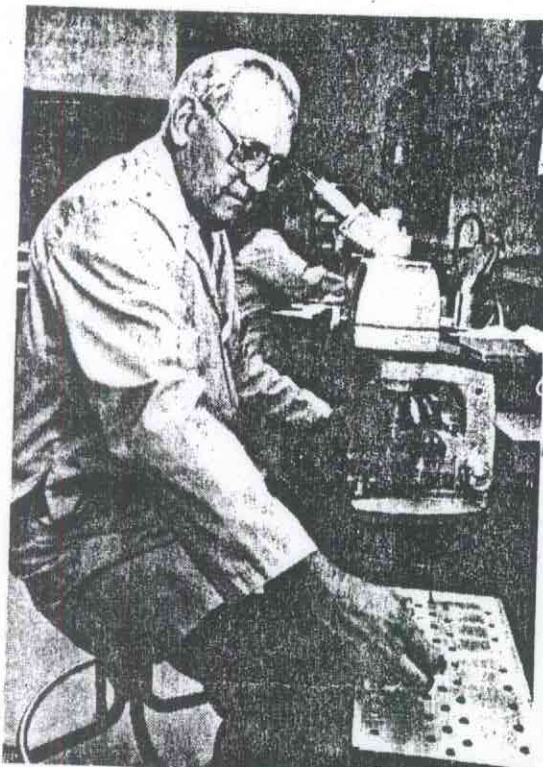
But even with Kennedy being hit at the earliest possible point and Connally the latest point, the assassin would have had less than 2 seconds to eject the first cartridge from the rifle and inject a new one — an impossible feat.

So the commission decided that Kennedy and Connally had to have been hit by the same bullet. That finding contradicted the testimony of Connally and his wife, who have insisted to this day that the two men were hit by separate shots.

The Warren report said Connally was wrong — he and Kennedy must have been hit by the same bullet. The report also said that in any case, that question was "not necessary to any essential findings of the commission," a statement that shocked critics.

To support its theory, the commission had to give the single bullet an amazing trajectory: It had





Former FBI agent Paul Stombaugh, who now runs the crime lab in Greenville, had the task of studying the physical evidence in the case.

MIKE BONNER PHOTO



Spartanburg lawyer Fletcher Thompson spearheaded the investigation into the assassination of President Kennedy 25 years ago.

MIKE BONNER PHOTO

to enter Kennedy at the base of his neck, exit at his throat, enter Connally's back, exit his chest, pass through his wrist and finally enter his thigh.

But the bullet that the commission said did all this damage, exhibit 399, was virtually unscathed. A test bullet fired through just the wrist of a cadaver came out grossly deformed, leading critics to believe a bullet could never do what exhibit 399 is purported to have done without major damage.

Many critics are even more disturbed by the fact that the bullet holes in the president's coat and shirt are more than 5 inches from the top of the collar, meaning the bullet could not have come out his throat.

The official autopsy report says that the bullet completely passed through Kennedy's neck, but the doctors who performed the autopsy didn't even find the throat wound, which had been obliterated by a tracheotomy incision performed in the emergency room. Doctors

probed the back wound and found that it was only a finger's length deep, meaning the bullet, found on a stretcher in the hospital, couldn't have gone all the way through Kennedy, Hughes said.

Doctors learned of the throat wound later, and by then it was too late to re-examine the body. Photos and X-rays of the body have been sealed at the request of the Kennedy family, which worried that a sensationalist tabloid would get hold of them. Hughes said that if the Kennedy family agreed to reopen those records, a lot of questions would be answered.

"Now, 25 years later, if the family would allow an unbiased forensic pathologist to examine just one photograph of Kennedy's back wound, we could know for sure exactly where the first bullet struck," Hughes said in a summary of the assassination he recently wrote. "If the bullet hole in the body matches the bullet hole in the coat and shirt, as it surely must, the bullet could not have exited the throat."

Instead, Hughes and other commission critics say one bullet, probably exhibit 399, entered Kennedy's back, and another, which was shattered into fragments found on the limousine floor, did all the damage to Connally. The throat wound would have been caused by bullet or bone fragments.

Everyone agrees that there was at least one more bullet — the one that hit Kennedy in the head, shattering his skull and covering Jacqueline Kennedy and others nearby with brain tissue.

Hughes believes the Warren Commission bungled its report primarily because of pressure from Johnson, who wanted the investigation concluded quickly. "LBJ purely and simply wanted to get the assassination out of the way and off the front page, and get his re-election campaign back on the front page," he said.

Despite his criticisms of Johnson and the Warren Commission, Hughes doesn't place much con- See PROBE, page A9



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fidence in conspiracy theories. He believes Oswald acted alone, and says rejection of the single-bullet theory does not mean there had to be a second assassin. Hughes believes Oswald could have made the first shot much earlier than the commission put it, shooting through the branches of an oak tree.

But Hughes, too, said questions remain. A puff of smoke seen by many coming from the grassy knoll can be explained by a car backfiring, he said, and the fact that many thought the gunfire came from there is probably due to acoustics in the plaza.

But there still is no explanation for a man seen by a Dallas police officer who ran to the knoll immediately after the shooting. The man seemed startled when the officer confronted him, but then showed a badge and claimed to be a Secret Service agent.

All the Secret Service agents stayed with Kennedy that day; none could have been in the grassy knoll.

"There are a million unanswered questions," Hughes said. "No one will ever know the truth."

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While Thompson and Hughes went to Dallas, Paul Stombaugh stayed in Washington. As a special agent in the microscopic analysis laboratory, his duty was the painstaking examination of physical evidence. The evidence began coming in on the night of the 22nd — including the presidential limousine.

"There was a good quantity of blood on the floor board . . . still liquefied," said Stombaugh, who now directs the Greenville County Crime Lab and is in charge of the forensic division there. Examiners found bullet fragments in the blood, fragments that were later traced to the rifle that was found in the Texas School Book Depository and linked to Oswald.

The rifle itself, a 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano, was brought in the next day. Stombaugh, whose expertise was in fiber analysis, found numerous fibers, including one good tuft of them on the butt plate. He later examined Oswald's clothes and was able to match the fibers from the gun with those of Oswald's shirt.

He also examined the blanket that the gun had been kept in. Hairs on the blanket matched Oswald's, further cementing the link between Oswald and the rifle. Stombaugh later testified on his findings for about 2 hours before the Warren Commission. "The most I could say is that (the fibers) could have come from



THOMAS E. MCCARVER PHOTO

**Brent Hughes**  
... reconstructed the scene

that shirt because you don't know how many of those shirts were made," said Stombaugh, who will retire next week, almost 25 years to the day after the assassination.

Unlike Thompson and Hughes, Stombaugh says he has no lingering questions about the assassination. He believes the evidence clearly indicates that Oswald killed Kennedy, and he believes Oswald was acting alone.

"We kicked it around in the lab time and time again, and we all came to the same conclusion," . . . that Oswald had shot and killed the president," he said. "It's just a guy who shot and killed the president, got himself caught and then got himself killed."

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With attention once again turning to the Kennedy assassination on its 25th anniversary, the three former agents say they have started thinking again about their roles in trying to solve the whodunnit of the century.

At the time, the three veteran FBI men regarded the case as, in Stombaugh's words, "just another murder."

"It was really just another assignment in a 37-year career," Thompson said. "This one was just shuffling paper." In fact, the agents said, the sheer magnitude of the investigation — hundreds of agents took part — meant that each had a relatively small role.

But as history and mystery have fanned the flames of speculation, the agents have come to realize they helped shape the outcome of possibly the most memorable event of our time.

"At the time, you really don't see the significance of it. You don't realize you're working on the most important case of your life," Hughes added. "We didn't have the overview that we have now."